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Afghanistan's 'West Point' Welcomes First Cadets

By U.S. Army Reserve
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KABUL, Afghanistan—On a snowy day in February, Afghanistan's first class of cadets took their place in history and reported for duty at the new National Military Academy Afghanistan.

The Academy is located on the grounds of a former flight technology school in Kabul.

Modeled after West Point, the Academy is a four-year, degree-granting institution that will commission 2nd lieutenants for the Afghan National Army. Cadets will earn an engineering degree with an emphasis on civil, mechanical, systems or electrical engineering.

They will incur a 25-year service commitment upon graduation.

Assistant Minister for Personnel and Education Hodayun Fawzi welcomed the first class, telling them to "be proud of their enlistment in this Academy."

Planning for the academy began more than a year ago, when then-Office of Military Cooperation - Afghanistan Chief Army Maj. Gen. Karl W. Eikenberry and senior Afghan Ministry of Defense leaders decided to establish an academy that would be the "crown jewel" of Afghan education.



Photo by U.S. Army National Guard Staff Sgt. Jared Myers

Cadet Ahmad Fahim, left, was the first cadet to in-process on Feb. 3, opening day for the National Military Academy Afghanistan.

Military Academy Study Team Chief Col. Barney Forsythe, OMC-A, and Maj. Gen. Mohammad Juma Nassar, MOD General Staff Working Group Director, submitted their initial plan for the Academy to the MOD and Chief, OMC-A in November 2003.

West Point deans and department heads then began the planning process, deploying to Afghanistan for several months at a time to write policy, develop admission standards and

determine the curriculum. They completed all steps hand in hand with their MOD counterparts to ensure programs were adapted to meet Afghan standards and culture.

Said Academy Superintendent Maj. Gen. Mohammed Sharif, "Our environments (U.S. and Afghan) are different. Planners considered all cultural aspects and did not impose anything on us. While the academy will be similar to West Point," said Sharif, "It will not be the same."

The MOD identified 1,023 potential professors with the necessary advanced degrees. OMC-A Academy Team Chief Col. James Wilhite and West Point faculty and OMC-A members Col. Ray Winkle, Col. Gary Krahn and Dr. Larry Butler winnowed the list, selecting



Photo by U.S. Army Reserve Col. James Wilhite

Maj. Doug Hays, left, requests Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak release funds for equipment purchases for the Academy; the Minister gladly agreed.



Photo by U.S. Army Reserve Master Sgt. D. Keith Johnson

Left: Cadets eat their first meal at the National Military Academy Afghanistan.

Right: Cadets at the National Military Academy Afghanistan form up to march to their first meal.



Photo by U.S. Army Lt. Col. Raymond Nelson

200 candidates with special criteria for teaching everything from world history to physics to chemistry to psychology.

The team eventually hired 30 professors to form the academic faculty.

By the end of November 2004, 353 cadet candidates had completed the competitive entrance exam. The MOD, in conjunction with OMC-A staff, then conducted personal interviews and selected the top 120 young men to join the first class.

Future classes will have between 250 to 300 students each, and upperclassmen will take on leadership roles in guiding the underclassmen.

Said Sharif of the Academy, "It represents all the ethnicities of this country."

The curriculum focuses on engineering because, "Our country is war struck and devastated," said Sharif. "We are in the process of rehabilitating it. We need more engineers because we need reconstruction."

Cadets, who are between the ages of 18 and 23, will earn \$80 a month as well as receive free books, supplies, housing and food, in addition to their education.

After seven weeks of basic combat training, graduates will begin their academic studies. In addition to their

engineering curriculum, they will study military leadership, ethics and psychology, among other topics.

"Our objective is to make a very strong and reliable army for Afghanistan," said 1st Lt. Abdul Haq, 2nd Platoon Leader and a military instructor at the Academy. "It should be accepted by all people. I was waiting to see the wars ended and see people take part in educational programs.

"I am thankful for your (U.S.) part in helping," said Haq.

Sixteen officers and noncommissioned officers are staffing cadet basic training. Eight of them will remain on site during the academic year.

Platoon sergeant Sgt. 1st Class Asadullah Nawabi echoed Haq's sentiments, saying "I would like to thank the U.S. military in helping us get things done." He was looking forward to teaching the cadets.

Some cadets had spent a lifetime planning for this day. Said Abdul Saboor from Baghlan Province, "Ever since I was a child I wanted to join the army. I left Kabul University and changed my major to come here."

Top scorer on the entrance exam was Jamshid Dehzad of Laghman Province. Top graduate of Shaheed Mohammed

Arif High School in Jalalabad, Dehzad said he was not only happy to be there, but "proud."

"We came to do our best to make our country successful," said cadet Abdul Ghafar from Mazar-e-Sharif of his attendance at the school.

"It is my country," said platoon sergeant Sgt. 1st Class Ghazi Ahmad of Paktia Province as if puzzled by the question about why he would serve at the Academy.

If he did not serve his country, then who would?

U.S. Army Corps of Engineer personnel prowled the campus on opening day, completing punch lists of work to be done and fine-tuning adjustments to the heat and lighting. "We want to make sure our contractors understand the needs," said Mike Rosales.

As old as the army are complaints about the food. What did the new cadets think of theirs?

"The food is great right now," said Abdul Qodos of Paktia Province, "But I don't know about the future."

The future is bright for Afghanistan, and for these young men who have stood up to be counted and to take their place in history.